



# State of Connecticut

Office of Early Childhood



**Office of Early Childhood**  
**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee**  
**Governor's Mid-Term Budget Adjustments**  
**Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D., Executive Director**  
**February 24, 2014**

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Good morning, Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Myra Jones-Taylor, Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Governor's proposed mid-term budget adjustments for early childhood services.

**1) Current Status:**

For context, I'd like to give you some background about the Office of Early Childhood. Established seven months ago, June 24, 2013, by the Governor's Executive Order #35, the Office of Early Childhood is the state agency that oversees a coordinated system of early childhood care, education and support. Our agency is currently comprised of:

- School Readiness, Child Day Care, state-funded Head Start, Even Start, Head Start Collaboration Office (formerly in the State Department of Education)
- The Children's Trust Fund (formerly in the Department of Social Services)
- Charts-a-Course (formerly in the Board of Regents)

By July of 2014, the following programs will be integrated into the Office of Early Childhood:

- Care 4 Kids, Child Care and Development Fund (from the Department of Social Services)
- Child Day Care and Youth Camp Licensing (from the Department of Public Health)
- Pre-K Special Education (from the Department of Education)<sup>1</sup>

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Grant will move from the Department of Public Health as of October 2014.

A Birth to Three study, evaluating the feasibility of moving the program to the Office of Early Childhood, has been completed and submitted to the Governor and co-chairs of this Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Only the discretionary funds from IDEA Part B-619 (Early Childhood Special Education) will be transferred to OEC in order to ensure that the special education needs of young children are fully integrated throughout OEC's work. The portion that currently goes to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) will remain at the State Department of Education (SDE).

Our mission and vision statements guide us as we integrate the work of these programs and build a coordinated system of care and support for young children and their families. Let me share our mission and vision with you now:

- **Our vision is that** all young children in Connecticut are safe, healthy, learning and thriving. Each child is surrounded by a strong network of nurturing adults who deeply value the importance of the first years of a child's life and have the skills, support and passion to meet the unique needs of every child.
- **Our Mission is** to support all young children in their development by ensuring that early childhood policy, funding, and services strengthen the critical role families, providers, educators, and communities play in a child's life.

Though new, the Office of Early Childhood has hit the ground running. With this year's funds, our agency is already working on a number of initiatives to improve outcomes for children. We are designing a universal developmental screening system, training providers on more effective learning standards, integrating data systems for better accountability and decision-making, providing funds to improve program facilities, and awarding scholarships to early childhood providers for continued education. And we are about to launch several more. For reference, I've included our current list of priority initiatives as an addendum.

## **2) Governor's FY15 Mid-Term Budget Adjustments for Early Childhood**

The Office of Early Childhood fully supports the Governor's proposed mid-term budget before us for Fiscal Year 2015. It reflects the Governor's commitment to improving outcomes for our young children. I commend the Governor for his ongoing dedication to invest in early care, education, early intervention and supports for children and their families.

I would like to help explain the rationale behind the major recommended adjustments in the proposed mid-term budget for the Office of Early Childhood.

### **a) Expand Pre-Kindergarten Opportunities and Subsidies**

The Governor has taken a bold step by calling for universal access to preschool for low-income children by 2019. More than 4,000 low-income children live in our poorest communities who have no access to pre-kindergarten. The Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2015 expands access by providing \$11,511,904 in funding for early learning opportunities for 1,020 low-income children. This expansion would be achieved by expanding the School Readiness program, which has the appropriate oversight, eligibility guidelines and funding infrastructure. The increased number of children served will be rolled out at the beginning of the 2015 academic year along with an increase in provider reimbursement rates and start-up funds to ensure programs are able to expand to meet the demand while continuing to provide high-quality care and education.

### **b) Increase Early Care and Education Quality**

The Office has undertaken significant work in the past seven months to improve Connecticut's early childhood system to ensure that families have access to the highest quality early childhood

services, preparing children for success in school and in life. Improving the quality of early care and education settings in a meaningful way will require the state to change the way we currently monitor, assess, support, incentivize and regulate programs. Improving quality involves everything from how we train the workforce, to improving facilities through Capitol Improvement bonding funds, to ensuring child care centers are free of safety hazards. The Governor's budget reflects \$5,817,409 in funding to support the quality improvement initiatives in the Office of Early Childhood.

*Safety Improvements:* The largest quality improvement initiative will increase the safety of child care settings by improving the state's oversight. The Governor's budget includes \$2,817,409 in additional funding to allow the Office to address problems outlined in recent independent reviews of Connecticut's child care licensing system. Reports from the Office of the Inspector General, Auditors of Public Accounts, National Association for Regulatory Administration, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and Child Health & Development Institute highlight problems that require attention to ensure the state's youngest children are safe in their child care settings. The Office of Early Childhood will act on the findings by modifying regulations, increasing trainings and enhancing policies and procedures for staff.

The most significant findings, however, on the infrequency of inspections and the backlog of background checks, require additional funding to address this shortfall. For context, the National Association for Regulatory Administration, a national organization, recommends a caseload of 50-60 cases/licensed sites or fewer per licensing inspector. Connecticut's inspectors currently have caseloads averaging 185 for licensed centers and group homes and averaging 265 for licensed family child care homes, more than triple the recommended caseload. The Governor's budget includes funds to meet the staffing levels required to process background checks in a timely manner and conduct inspections of licensed family child care homes and centers annually. I've outlined the new positions for you in the addendum to my testimony.

*Educational Improvements:* To improve the quality of the *education and support* children receive in early care and education settings, the Governor's budget allocates \$3 million toward a set of quality enhancement initiatives organized under the umbrella of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). This additional funding will allow our agency to implement meaningful changes for quality improvement by providing funding for initiatives as well as key staff positions to manage those initiatives. I've outlined those positions for you in the addendum as well. With the funding, the Office will:

- Implement a statewide coordinated system of technical assistance and professional development to improve child care quality in all settings and develop a meaningful rating system to measure progress. Particular attention will be paid to licensed and unlicensed home care settings where the quality of care is unknown.
- Support and incentivize programs to achieve higher levels of quality while continuing to prioritize serving children facing the highest barriers to success.
- Provide important information to families and communities to help them make informed choices so that young can children flourish.

**c) Technical Adjustments:**

*Increase Funding for Care4Kids Program Due to Child Care Worker Contractual Costs:*

Care4Kids rates have not been changed since 2001, which not only places a financial burden on providers but also affects child care quality. For years, little attention has been paid to family child care providers who care for a large majority of our infants and toddlers, those children who in the earliest years need a good start. The State of Connecticut and CSEA-SEIU Local 2001 have reached a collective bargaining agreement with licensed and unlicensed family child care providers. This agreement must be ratified by the child care union and approved by the Legislature. The budget includes \$11,306,600 for this agreement, which will raise Care4Kids rates and provide professional development and incentives for licensed and unlicensed Care4Kids providers.

*Care4Kids Caseload Projection:* The budget increases the Care4Kids program by \$3,039,400 to cover re-estimated caseload projections.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, the Office of Early Childhood fully supports the governor's proposed mid-term budget. It is the appropriate blend of funding for expansion of services to low-income families paired with investment in quality to ensure that allocated funds are spent wisely and yield improved outcomes for children. An investment now in early childhood initiatives will ensure that Connecticut continues to be aligned with Federal funding priorities. As you know, investing early in the care, education, and support of young children has powerful impacts far into the future: it contributes to a well prepared workforce, reduces criminal justice costs, and strengthens the fabric of families and communities making Connecticut an attractive place to live and work. But most importantly, access to affordable, high-quality care and education will provide our youngest children with a strong foundation to learn, contribute, and thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My staff and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

## **ADDENDUM**

### **Priority Initiatives**

The Office has undertaken significant work in the past seven months to improve Connecticut's early childhood system to ensure that families have access to the highest quality early childhood services, preparing children for success in school and in life. We have identified the following systems-building strategies and initiatives to be developed and implemented over the next 18 months:

- Quality Create a universal early screening and referral system that will lead to children being screened more regularly and earlier identification of those with needs, allowing for earlier intervention and improved outcomes.
- Build a centralized early childhood information system (ECIS) that will make it easier to manage and analyze data to better inform policy and practice.
- Develop a plan for a coordinated home visiting system.
- Develop and implement a plan to coordinate early childhood technical assistance statewide to increase the quality of programs and services offered to young children.
- Act on recommendations from reports and assessments to improve the children care and youth camp licensing system to keep children healthy and safe in early childhood settings.
- Create a seamless and coordinated Birth to Five early care and education system that increases access, information and quality.
- Launch a public information campaign targeted to families, providers, and communities on the importance that starting earlier is better, quality matters, and the linkages to resources for accessing early childhood programs, services and support.

### **Quality Improvement Staffing Details**

#### **Licensing System Improvements:**

- *To achieve annual inspections:* 16 licensing inspectors, 2 supervisors, 1 manager
- *To conduct background checks in a timely manner:* 8 office assistants, 1 health program manager
- *To support the entire 56-person division:* 1 IT support staff, 1 attorney

#### **Educational Improvements:**

- *To launch and manage a Quality Rating and Improvement System:* 1 QRIS manager, 1 community coordinator
- *To ensure all Early Care and Education grants and subsidies, Quality Enhancement funds, and Capital Improvement bonds are disbursed and monitored properly:* 2 fiscal administrative assistants